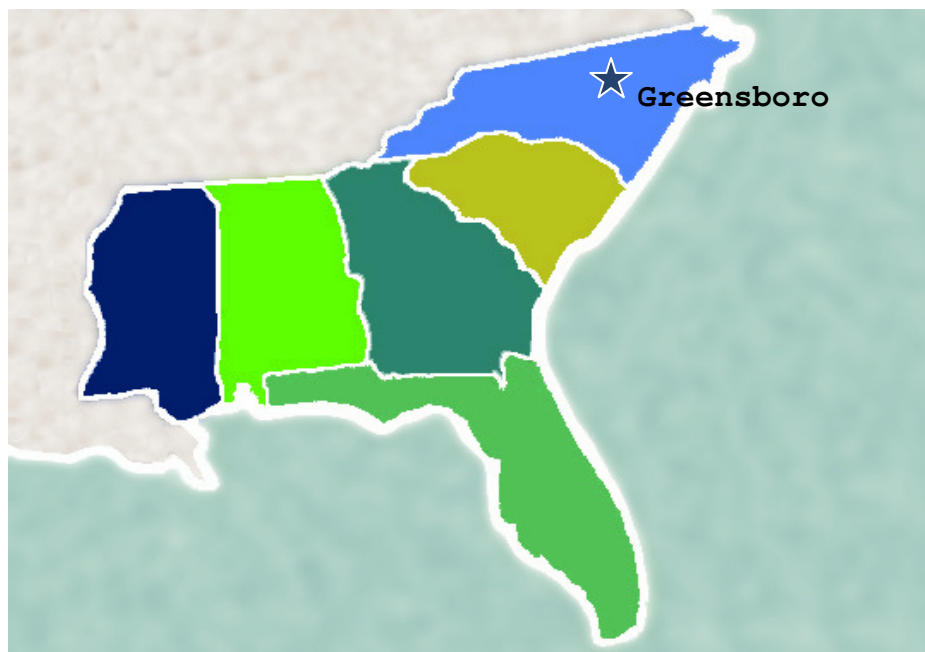# REGIONAL *EDUCATIONAL* LABORATORY
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EVIDENCE BASED EDUCATION REQUEST DESK

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To assist educators and policymakers in their efforts to apply the evidence base to decisions about policies, programs, and practices they encounter.

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REQUEST:

EBE #555 was in response to the request "Is there any new compelling research for turning around low-performing schools?" The articles included in that document are on target, but include articles through 2009. Other than the Bryk et al. (2009) book, which I have, is there any new research from 2009-present?

Introduction

This EBE Request seeks to provide an updated review of recent research (2009-present) regarding school improvement and reform with special concentration on turning around chronically low-performing schools. The response is divided into three main sections: (1) Recent Research on Effective Methods for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools, (2) Relevant Websites relating to school reform and turnarounds, and (3) Bibliography and References.

Recent Research on Effective Methods for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

Overall, the balance of evidence on turnaround schools is mixed, as most comprehensive reviews note the considerable variance in quality and scope of the currently available studies (Haynes, 2011; Leithwood, 2010a, 2010b; Rice & Malen, 2010; and Stuit, 2010). These reviews of the literature will serve as being the most useful if the reader is looking for surveys of the available research and recommended strategies. Haynes (2011) identifies three specific policies for "effective school improvement" (pp. 13-16):

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1. Embrace high expectations and goals for all students by establishing college and career readiness as the core mission of the K–12 education system.
2. Support the development of school leader preparation programs that develop the essential skills and competencies necessary for leading effective high school improvement.
3. Replace the fairly ineffective federal improvement system for high schools within the No Child Left Behind Act with requirements and support for the implementation of coherent and comprehensive state and district systems of high school improvement.
    a. Create a culture of data-based decisionmaking that supports leaders in their efforts to lead instructional improvement.
    b. Position school districts as central players in creating a system of good schools.
    c. Provide support to school leaders through intermediaries—nonprofit organizations that serve as central sources of experience and technical support.
    d. Support staff selection and professional growth systems that foster collegial collaboration in pursuit of high-impact, evidence-based practices consistent with state and district learning goals.

Leithwood (2010a, 2010b) provides comprehensive reviews of over 30 studies identified by the author as demonstrating some level of evidence in support of various reform and turnaround policies or strategies. In Leithwood (2010a) the author identifies seven "knowledge claims" commonly found in the literature on turnarounds with variable levels of evidence. The seven "claims" include (p. 3):

1. The fundamental capacities required of system leaders to successfully turnaround their districts are those associated with expert problem solving.
2. An underperforming district cannot be turned around without turning around the underperforming schools within it.
3. Organizations turnaround in —stages, each of which requires at least partly different forms of leadership and improvements to at least partly different organizational conditions.
4. There are many possible causes of school underperformance and the causes specific to each school and district should be carefully diagnosed before initiating turnaround strategies.
5. District turnaround strategies need to be differentiated for each school in the district based on the causes of its underperformance and the turnaround stage in which the district and school finds itself.
6. Commonly used sequences of district turnaround strategies have been identified in a small body of research but their value to a district depends on similarities in the causes of district underperformance.
7. There are a significant number of individual strategies for turning around underperforming districts. These strategies ought to be treated as a menu of "solutions" following a careful diagnosis of the "problem."

The remainder of Leithwood's (2010a) discussion involves a critical examination of the evidence supplied in support of the various "claims" based on the available research[1] and concludes with four cautions (pp. 27-28):

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[1] See also Leithwood (2010b) for an extended analysis and review of this literature.

First, there are relatively few studies that provide direct evidence about how significantly underperforming school districts became adequately or high performing districts in a relatively short period of time (the textbook definition of a "turnaround"). Furthermore, the number of such studies appears larger, on the surface, than is actually the case because the same evidence has been used as the basis for multiple articles, newsletters and briefing documents.

Second, district turnaround evidence often results in lists of common strategies for turnaround district leaders, often with a temporal flavor to them (see Claim 6 section above. These lists implicitly and likely unintentionally fly in the face of quite compelling evidence that district underperformance can have many causes. Different causes call for different strategies.

Third, district turnaround evidence is uniquely, and by definition, concerned with quick and substantial improvements in student performance. Furthermore, this evidence does demonstrate the possibility of such quick and substantial improvement. But growing evidence from research on both school and district turnarounds also indicates that sustaining a turnaround is much more challenging than is making the turnaround to begin with (e.g., Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010). The need for significant and ongoing capacity development is the key to sustaining improved performance and this is not something that cannot be done quickly.

Finally, the individual strategies associated with successful turnaround identified by the evidence are not qualitatively different than strategies which are also associated with the more common district "improvement" contexts.

In contrast to most of the traditional reviews of the turnaround literature Murphy (2008, 2009, 2010; and Murphy & Meyers, 2009) has concentrated on examining the research on turnarounds in the corporate, government and nonprofit sectors, looking to apply the lessons/strategies to educational research and school reform efforts. With regards to educational leadership Murphy (2008) identified three "defining themes" of the "organizational recovery (and failure) in the larger literature on firms and public agencies" (p. 80):

1. Leadership as the critical variable in the turnaround equation;
2. Change of leadership as a generally essential element in organizational recovery; and
3. Type of leadership, but not style, as important in organizational reintegration work.

Further research by Murphy (2009, 2010) and Murphy and Meyers (2009) led to the identification of seven "macro-level lessons" for turnaround schools (Murphy, 2010, pp. 162-171):

1. Lesson #1: Not all failing schools are worth saving
2. Lesson #2: Focus on leadership
3. Lesson #3: Act quickly
4. Lesson #4: Diagnose before selecting recovery pathways
5. Lesson #5: Emphasize efficiency moves first—and marshal resources

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6. Lesson #6: Create hope through vision
7. Lesson #7: Focus on core lines of work, customers, and continuous improvement

Rice and Malen (2010) produced an extensive literature review on school reconstitution for the National Education Association (NEA) and found the results to again be quite mixed, with variable levels of quality and rigor in the evidence. The authors identified four preconditions which they contend need to be met before policymakers proceed with efforts to reconstitute schools (p. viii):

1. An adequate supply of administrators, teachers, and staff who are, by some standard, more capable and committed and who are "waiting in the wings" to take positions in reconstituted schools.
2. Valued resources and meaningful support structures to make reconstituted schools "magnets" for high-quality educators.
3. Additional resources that are sufficient to bolster the capacity of these schools to improve performance and that are flexible so site educators can employ them in ways that are aligned with their priorities.
4. Sufficient time to ensure that the above conditions can be met.

Smarick (2010) contends that school turnaround is a "fallacy" and that school closures should be considered in certain cases in place of attempts at turnaround. Murphy (2009, 2010) advocated similar policy options in specific cases as well. Stuit (2010) provides a comprehensive and extended analysis of over 2,000 charter and traditional public school turnarounds across ten states (AZ, CA, FL, MI, MN, NC, OH, PA, TX, and WN) spanning approximately five years, 2003-04 to 2008-09. The findings did not support evidence of improvement in the turnaround schools examined across the ten states (p. 10):

> What did results show? A dismal state of affairs. In all ten states, the charter sector has done a slightly better job of eliminating low-performing schools, but neither sector has cause for celebration (see Figure ES-1 on page 11). Seventy-two percent of the original low-performing charter schools remained in operation, and remained low-performing, five years later, compared with 80 percent of district schools.

> Few low-performing schools in either sector—barely 1 percent—managed to dramatically improve their academic performance over this five-year period, and fewer than 10 percent made even moderate gains. Charter schools were not statistically more or less likely to turn around than their district peers.

> To the extent that this study yields any good news, it is this (and it is modest): In all ten states, low-performing charter schools were likelier to close than were low-performing district schools. Nineteen percent of weak charters were shuttered, versus 11 percent of district low performers. And in both sectors, the majority of schools that closed were lower-performing than their neighboring schools; thus, students leaving closed schools had better academic options nearby.

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There are also several articles with smaller samples or case studies in this review which the reader may find instructive.[2] These results are again mixed (Gwynne & de la Torre, 2009), with some demonstrating stronger improvements in achievement than others (Duke & Jacobson, 2011; and Travers & Christiansen, 2010). Fernandez (2011) also examines the related topic of the impact of school improvement plans (SIPs) on student achievement and finds a positive impact of school planning on both math and reading outcomes.

Relevant Websites

- **The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement:** http://www.centerforcsri.org/
- **School Improvement Network Blog:** http://schoolimprovementnetwork.blogspot.com/
- **TurnAround Schools:** http://turnaroundschools.com/

Bibliography/References

David, J. L. (2010). Drastic school turnaround strategies are risky. *Educational Leadership*, *68*(2), 78-80.

Abstract: In this article the author discusses the use of draconian measures to improve or mend schools that are in danger of failure in terms of discipline, academic achievement, or both. The article states that such policies frequently are modeled on turnaround behaviors seen in the world of business and notes the risk of comparison. A number of topics are addressed including the mass firing of teachers at failing institutions, the closing of under-performing schools, and the inherent danger associated with drastic action. [*PDF included*]

David, J. L., & Cuban, L. (2010). *Cutting through the hype: The essential guide to school reform* (Revised, Expanded, and Updated Edition). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Abstract: *Cutting Through the Hype: The Essential Guide to School Reform* is a revised, expanded, and updated version of the classic work by Jane L. David and Larry Cuban. It offers balanced analyses of 23 currently popular school reform strategies, from teacher performance pay and putting mayors in charge to turnaround schools and data-driven instruction. Avoiding the heated rhetoric and exaggerated claims that accompany many education reforms, each chapter explains clearly and concisely what each reform intends to do, what happens in reality, and what it takes to make it work. Written by two savvy and experienced educator-researchers, *Cutting Through the Hype* is a book for expert and nonexpert readers alike—policymakers, researchers, school leaders, teachers, and concerned citizens and parents—indeed, for all who are committed to schools and have a stake in their success.

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[2] See: David, 2010; David & Cuban, 2010; Duke & Jacobson, 2011; Duke & Salmonowics, 2010; Gwynne & de la Torre, 2009; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; and Travers & Christiansen, 2010.

Duke, D. L., & Jacobson, M. (2011). Tackling the toughest turnaround—Low-performing high schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *92*(5), 34-38.

Abstract: Case studies of two high schools that have been turned around from failing to successful show different ways in which failing high schools can be made to succeed. Both high schools concentrated on first helping incoming freshman, and both reforms were driven by data. They differed in staffing and the focus of their first year of reform. [*PDF included*]

Duke, D., & Salmonowicz, M. (2010). Key decisions of a first-year 'turnaround' principal. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *38*(1), 33-58.

Abstract: This article examines the decisions made by one principal in her first year as a school turnaround specialist in a low-performing urban elementary school. Researchers focused on decisions related to the principal's three high-priority concerns: (1) elimination of an ineffective instructional program; (2) creation of a culture of teacher accountability; and (3) development of an effective reading program. Forty-nine decisions were identified and organized into five categories—performance, policy, program, process, and personnel decisions. The study concludes with a discussion of what principals need to know in order to make the kinds of decisions required of a 'turnaround' principal. [*PDF included*]

Fernandez, K. E. (2011). Evaluating school improvement plans and their affect on academic performance. *Educational Policy*, *25*(2), 338-367.

Abstract: The development of a school improvement plan (SIP) has become an integral part of many school reform efforts. However, there are almost no studies that empirically examine the effectiveness of SIPs. The few studies examining the planning activities of organizations have generally focused on the private sector and have not provided clear or consistent evidence that such planning is effective. Some studies have even suggested formal planning can lead to inflexible and myopic practices or may simply waste time and resources. This study explores the relationship between the quality of SIPs and school performance by examining a unique dataset from the Clark County School District, the fifth largest school district in the nation. The study finds that, even when controlling for a variety of factors, there is a strong and consistent association between the quality of school planning and overall student performance in math and reading. [*PDF included*]

Gwynne, J., & de la Torre, M. (2009). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. **Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.**

Abstract: This report reveals that eight in 10 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students displaced by school closings transferred to schools ranking in the bottom half of system schools on standardized tests. However, because most displaced students transferred from one low-performing school to another, the move did not, on average, significantly affect student achievement. The report demonstrates that the success of a school closing policy hinges on the quality of the receiving schools that accept the displaced students. One year after school closings, displaced students who re-enrolled in the weakest receiving schools (those with test scores in the bottom quartile of all system schools) experienced an achievement

loss of more than a month in reading and half-a-month in math. Meanwhile, students who re-enrolled in the strongest receiving schools (those in the top quartile) experienced an achievement gain of nearly one month in reading and more than two months in math. The authors focused on 18 CPS elementary schools closed between 2001 and 2006 due to chronically poor academic performance or enrollment significantly below capacity. The schools enrolled 5,445 students at the time of their closings. To assess the academic effects of closing on these students, the study compares students ages 8 and older displaced by school closings with students in similar schools that did not close. The comparison group provides an estimate of how the displaced students should have performed on a range of outcomes had their schools not been closed. The study reflects CCSR's commitment to studying education issues that are top priorities in Chicago and districts nationwide. In Chicago, multiple rounds of school closings have prompted a powerful backlash from some teachers, students, community members and advocacy groups. Nevertheless, CPS and many other large urban school systems continue to make school closings a cornerstone of reform, touting the financial and academic benefits of closing underutilized or underperforming campuses.

PDF: http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/CCSRSchoolClosings-Final.pdf

Haynes, M. (2011). *Meeting the challenge: The role of school leaders in turning around the lowest-performing high schools* **(Policy Brief). Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.**

Abstract: As the national policy community has coalesced around the priority of graduating all students ready for college and careers, the challenge of improving the lowest-performing high schools serving the most challenged populations remains. This policy brief examines the limitations of previous high school reforms and describes new approaches showing promise in producing substantive changes in secondary level teaching and learning. It highlights the central role of school leaders and districts in creating high school learning environments that can engage and support students with widely divergent learning needs. The brief concludes with a set of policy recommendations for the design of coherent systems to build human capital and foster the conditions for high school transformation.

PDF: http://www.all4ed.org/files/MeetingTheChallenge.pdf

Leithwood, K. (2010a). *Turning around underperforming school systems: Guidelines for district leaders***. Alberta: College of Alberta School Superintendents.**

Abstract: Not provided.

PDF:
http://o.b5z.net/i/u/10063916/h/Moving%20and%20Improving/District_turnaround_main_text_June_8
.pdf

Leithwood, K. (2010b). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools***, *9*(3), 245-291.**

Abstract: This article identifies characteristics of school districts that have been exceptionally successful in closing gaps in achievement among diverse groups of students, including students in challenging circumstances. Evidence for the paper was provided by 31 studies. These were studies, published in the past ten years, which reported original evidence about the association between one or more district characteristics and some valued set of outcomes, or described one or more practices within a district previously found to be high performing. Ten district characteristics are described and several implications for future policy, research, and practice are outlined. [*PDF included*]

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Strauss, T. (2010). *Leading school turnaround: How successful leaders transform low-performing schools*. **San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.**

Contents: Figures and Tables -- The Authors -- Introduction: Understanding School Turnaround Leadership -- Part One: The Dynamic Context in Which Turnaround Leaders Work -- 1. Reasons for School Failure -- 2. A Staged Conception of School Turnaround Processes -- 3. The Stages Illustrated: Rowlatt's Hill Primary School -- Part Two: What Turnaround Leaders Do, and How They Do It -- 4. How Turnaround Leaders Create a Shared Sense of Direction in Their Schools -- 5. How Turnaround Leaders Foster Capacity Development Among Their Teachers -- 6. How Turnaround Leaders Redesign Their School Organisations -- 7. How Turnaround Leaders Manage Improvements in Their School's Instructional Programme -- 8. Turnaround Leadership Up Close and Personal -- Part Three: Outstanding Challenges -- 9. How Schools Move from Turnaround to "Stay Around" -- 10. How to Reach High Performance – Conclusion -- Appendix: Methods Used For Studies – Notes – References -- Index.

Murphy, J. (2008). The place of leadership in turnaround schools: Insights from organizational recovery in the public and private sectors. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *46*(1), 74-98.

Abstract: *Purpose* – The purpose of this paper is to review the literature from the organizational sciences to develop a grounded narrative of turnaround leadership. *Design/methodology/approach* – The paper is a review of literature, which employs a ten-step process to explore and make sense of the turnaround literature from the organizational sciences. The paper relies on strategies appropriate for document analysis, and borrows analytic strategies (e.g. memoing, coding) employed with interview data. *Findings* – The paper finds three defining themes that flow from the review of empirical and theoretical work on organizational recovery in firms, non-educational public agencies, and not-for-profit organizations: leadership as the critical variable in the turnaround equation; change of leadership as a generally essential element in organizational recovery; and type of leadership, but not style, as important in organizational reintegration work. *Practical implications* – The paper posits that the literature on turning around failing organizations in sectors outside of education provides blueprints for recovery activity in failing schools. The implications for turnaround leadership are particularly strong. *Originality/value* – This paper is the first systematic effort to mine research in the corporate, not-for-profit, and public sectors to develop insights for leadership in failing schools. [*PDF included*]

Murphy, J. (2009). Turning around failing schools: Policy insights from the corporate, government, and nonprofit sectors. *Educational Policy*, *23*(6), 796-830.

Abstract: In this article, the author reviews research from the organizational sciences to develop turnaround policy guidelines that may prove useful for policy makers and educators. The approach is an integrative review of the literature. The author employs a comprehensive process to unpack and make sense of the turnaround literature from the organizational sciences. Strategies appropriate for document analysis and interview data are employed. Insights are captured from the five major research pathways for studying organizational turnaround. Research findings are blended into three policy dimensions, namely, leadership, efficiency, and focus. It is argued that the literature on turning around failing organizations in sectors outside of education provides potential blueprints for recovery activity in failing schools. This is the first systematic effort to mine research in the corporate, not-for-profit, and public sectors to develop policy insights for shaping efforts to turn around failing schools. [*PDF included*]

Murphy, J. (2010). Turning around failing organizations: Insights for educational leaders. *Journal of Educational Change*, *11*(2), 157-176.

Abstract: *Purpose* In this article, we review the literature from the organizational sciences to develop a grounded narrative of turnaround in education. *Approach* The approach is a review of literature. We employ an integrated process to unpack and make sense of the turnaround literature from the organizational sciences. We rely on strategies appropriate for document analysis, and borrow analytic strategies (e.g., memoing, coding) employed with interview data. *Findings* We examine seven defining themes that flow from our review of empirical and theoretical work on organizational recovery in firms, non-educational public agencies, and not-for-profit organizations: (1) not all failing schools are worth saving; (2) focus on leadership; (3) act quickly; (4) diagnose first; (5) emphasize efficiency moves; (6) create a sense of hope; and (7) backward map from the customer and focus on core activities linked to valued outcomes. *Implications* We posit that the literature on turning around failing organizations in sectors outside of education provides blueprints for recovery activity in failing schools. The implications for turnaround leadership are particularly strong. *Originality* This is the first systematic effort to mine research in the corporate, not-for-profit, and public sectors to develop insights for turning around failing schools. [*PDF included*]

Murphy, J., & Meyers, C. V. (2009). Rebuilding organizational capacity in turnaround schools: Insights from the corporate, government, and non-profit sectors. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *37*(1), 9-27.

Abstract: In this article, we provide a grounded narrative of capacity building in the turnaround equation by exploring the turnaround literature outside of education and applying it to troubled schools. Our analysis is based upon reviews of: (1) 14 comprehensive, historical volumes that examine the turnaround phenomenon; (2) 16 book-length analyses of turnaround in a single organization or a specific industry; (3) articles attending to theory building in this emerging area of scholarship; and (4) a plethora of empirical studies examining turnaround in a variety of different (non-educational) contexts. We organize findings on capacity building in turnarounds into the following broad categories: (1) rallying and mobilizing people (motivating people, building, morale, and communicating openly); (2) growing people (empowering people, building teams, and developing people); and (3) creating a productive culture. We close by teasing out important lessons from the turnaround literature in the non-education sector to capacity building in troubled schools. [*PDF included*]

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Paletta, A., Candal, C. S., & Vidoni, D. (2009). Networking for the turnaround of a school district: The Boston University-Chelsea partnership. *Education and Urban Society*, *41*(4), 469-488.

Abstract: The 20-year partnership between Boston University and the school district of Chelsea, Massachusetts, came to an official end in June 2008. Although the partnership is by many measures successful, the continued success of the district will depend on how well Boston University is able to share with stakeholders management techniques and the intellectual capital that the university helped to accumulate and produce. This article discusses how the partnership provided for Chelsea's future by working with stakeholders to promote student achievement and to capitalize on a network of private and nonprofit institutions to improve the school system. [*PDF included*]

Rice, J. K, & Malen, B. (2010). *School reconstitution as an education reform strategy: A synopsis of the evidence*. **Washington, DC: National Education Association.**

Abstract: Not provided.

PDF: http://neapriorityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/School-Reconstitution-as-an-Education-Reform-Strategy.pdf

Smarick, A. (2010). The turnaround fallacy. *Education Next*, *10*(1), 20-26.

Abstract: Not provided.

PDF: http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20101_20.pdf

Stuit, D. A. (2010). *Are bad schools immortal? The scarcity of turnarounds and shutdowns in both charter and district sectors*. **Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.**

Abstract: This study from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute finds that low-performing public schools—both charter and traditional district schools—are stubbornly resistant to significant change. After identifying more than 2,000 low-performing charter and district schools across ten states, analyst David Stuit tracked them from 2003-04 through 2008-09 to determine how many were turned around, shut down, or remained low-performing. Results were generally dismal. Seventy-two percent of the original low-performing charters remained in operation—and remained low-performing—five years later. So did 80 percent of district schools. Read on to learn more—including results from the ten states.

Link to PDFs: http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/are-bad-schools-immortal.html

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Travers, J., & Christiansen, B. (2010). *Strategic staffing for successful schools: Breaking the cycle of failure in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*. **Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.**

Abstract: As the federal Race to the Top initiative and current Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization discussions focus on the importance of turning around low-performing schools, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District provides an instructive example for how effective turnaround can be accomplished on the district level. CMS is combining the use of effectiveness data and strategic staffing to create a coherent, systemic approach to school turnarounds – and getting gains in student achievement as a result. *Strategic Staffing for Successful Schools: Breaking the Cycle of Failure in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*, is a case study released by the Aspen Institute and Education Resource Strategies, Inc. (ERS). The study focuses on how CMS uses principal and teacher effectiveness data in its school turnaround efforts.

PDF:
http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/pubs/ED_Case_Study_Strategic_Staffing.pdf

Methodology

In order to answer this request, we looked in Wilson Web (UNCG education database) and ERIC databases. In addition, we also searched Google using the phrases "turnaround," "school reform," etc. We also searched the websites of the following organizations: Alliance for Excellent Education; American Enterprise Institute (AEI); American Institutes for Research (AIR); Brookings Institution; Center for Assessment/The National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (NCIEA); Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement; Center for Public Education; Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE)/National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST); Center on Education Policy (CEP); Center on Innovation & Improvement; Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR); Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE); Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO); Economic Policy Institute (EPI); Education Commission of the States (ECS); Educational Testing Service (ETS); Institute of Education Sciences (IES); Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; MDRC; National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER); National Governors Association Center for Best Practices; National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER); RAND Corporation; Urban Institute; and U.S. Department of Education.

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